



AGRA BAZAR AS A CULTURAL ARCHIVE: TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE

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Abstract

This paper examines *Agra Bazar* (1954), Habib Tanvir's seminal play, as a cultural archive that preserves and performs Indian traditions through people's theatre. Set against the backdrop of post-independence India, the play utilizes folk performance, vernacular language, and indigenous storytelling techniques to challenge elite and colonial aesthetics. Central to the narrative is the poetry of Nazir Akbarabadi, whose celebration of everyday life and common people becomes a vehicle for cultural resistance and identity formation. The study employs performance theory, particularly Diana Taylor's concept of the repertoire, to argue that *Agra Bazar* functions as a living, embodied archive. Through textual analysis and critical scholarship, the paper highlights how Tanvir's theatre reclaims marginalized voices and promotes a pluralistic vision of Indian identity. *Agra Bazar* is thus seen as both a historical document and a dynamic site of cultural memory, reinforcing the role of theatre in shaping collective consciousness.

Keywords: Tradition, People's Theatre; Nazir Akbarabadi; Cultural Archive; Folk Theatre; Vernacular Language; Indian Drama; Postcolonial Performance; Identity.

Cite This Article: Paramjit Kaur. (2018). "AGRA BAZAR AS A CULTURAL ARCHIVE: TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE." *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, 6(4), 357-362. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v6.i4.2018.6154>.

1. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology that integrates textual analysis and historiographical inquiry to examine *Agra Bazar* as a dynamic cultural text. The analysis is grounded in closely reading the play's dramaturgical strategies, linguistic choices, narrative structure, and aesthetic techniques, situating them within the context of postcolonial cultural production and popular performance traditions in India. Central to this approach is the examination of *Agra Bazar* as a performative archive—a living repository of memory and tradition, as theorized by Diana Taylor's framework of the "archive" and the "repertoire." The research engages with critical literature from theatre studies, postcolonial theory, and cultural anthropology. In addition,

the study includes an analysis of historical records, early reviews, and production notes from *Agra Bazar*'s initial performances, exploring how the play was received in different socio-political climates and how its legacy evolved. This multi-layered methodology enables a nuanced understanding of *Agra Bazar* as both a text and a performance practice—one that resists erasure by institutional archives and instead sustains cultural memory through vernacular aesthetics, oral traditions, and embodied performance.

Agra Bazar as a Cultural Archive: Tradition, Identity, and the People's Theatre

Theatre has long served as a powerful vehicle for expressing collective consciousness, especially in societies negotiating cultural disruption, colonial legacies, and the politics of identity. In postcolonial India, where the nation-building project was accompanied by questions of linguistic, regional, and cultural plurality, theatre emerged not only as an artistic form but as a tool of resistance, reclamation, and cultural articulation. In this context, *Agra Bazar* (1954), conceived and directed by Habib Tanvir, stands as a seminal work that redefined Indian theatrical practice. It is not merely a play but a cultural intervention—a performative text that archives lived experiences, oral traditions, and vernacular expressions often omitted from institutional narratives. Through the dramatization of Nazir Akbarabadi's poetry, Tanvir crafts a theatrical tapestry that interweaves language, music, gesture, and space to elevate the everyday as worthy of performance. Unlike conventional plays centered on elite subjects or mythological epics, *Agra Bazar* turns its gaze toward the bazaar, the street, and the subaltern, celebrating the multiplicity of ordinary lives. In doing so, the play functions as a cultural archive—a living, breathing repertoire of memory and tradition that transcends the written word. Drawing upon folk idioms, regional performance forms like *Nautanki* and *Dastangoi*, and a linguistic palette of Hindustani, Tanvir constructs a theatrical language that is inclusive, dialogic, and deeply rooted in the cultural soil of North India. Furthermore, *Agra Bazar* must be understood within the historical moment of its production. Staged in the early years of post-independence India, the play responded to a cultural environment seeking to reconcile modernity with heritage. It rejected the hegemony of the Western proscenium model and instead embraced indigenous aesthetics and spatial reconfigurations, often staging performances in open marketplaces or community grounds. This spatial politics was not incidental; it signaled a conscious reclamation of public space as a democratic stage, where art was not for the elite but of, by, and for the people. In positioning *Agra Bazar* as a performative archive, this paper explores how the play acts as a site for preserving endangered oral traditions, reanimating forgotten cultural practices, and resisting homogenized representations of Indian identity. It interrogates how Tanvir's dramaturgy mobilizes performance as knowledge, blurring the boundaries between actor and spectator, text and action, history and myth. Through its embodiment of Nazir's poetry and its evocation of a plural, syncretic Indian ethos, *Agra Bazar* becomes more than a historical drama—it becomes a repository of cultural memory and a blueprint for people's theatre.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

Agra Bazar is rooted in two interwoven historical landscapes: the 18th-century milieu of Nazir Akbarabadi's life in North India and the mid-20th-century postcolonial moment in which Habib Tanvir created the play. By bridging these two periods, the production reflects not only on the

historical erasure of vernacular voices but also on the contemporary struggle to redefine cultural identity in a newly independent India. Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830), often referred to as the "people's poet," remains an anomalous figure in the Urdu literary canon, which traditionally valorized the ornate, romanticized ghazal tradition of poets like Mir and Ghalib. Nazir, by contrast, turned his poetic attention to the quotidian—writing about banjaras (nomads), bangle-sellers, faqirs, children, festivals, and even roti (flatbread). His verse, written in a blend of Personalized Urdu and colloquial Hindustani, articulated the texture of everyday life and highlighted some pluralistic social world rich in syncretism and secular spirit. Yet, this populist orientation led to his marginalization by literary elites who dismissed his work as lacking in refinement and poetic seriousness. Tanvir's decision to center *Agra Bazar* around Nazir was both aesthetic and ideological. In resurrecting Nazir's voice, Tanvir challenged the established hierarchies of language, form, and subject matter. The play's structure—eschewing linear narrative for episodic vignettes based on Nazir's poems—mirrored the fluidity and spontaneity of oral traditions, resisting the constraints of Western dramaturgical form. This dramaturgical experiment was not only innovative but also politically potent, emphasizing theatre as an embodied archive of marginalized histories and expressions. Equally significant is the cultural moment in which *Agra Bazar* was first staged—1954, just seven years after India's independence. The 1950s marked an era of intense nation-building, wherein intellectuals, artists, and policymakers grappled with articulating a cohesive sense of "Indianness." Much of this cultural self-fashioning was dominated by upper-caste, urban, and Anglophone elites who gravitated toward either Sanskrit revivalism or Westernized modernism. In contrast, Tanvir's embrace of folk performance forms, local dialects, and non-professional rural actors—including actual fruit-sellers and craftspeople from Chhattisgarh—was a radical departure from this trajectory. His work democratized theatrical space by dismantling the boundaries between performer and audience, high art and folk expression, and scripted drama and spontaneous performance. Tanvir's commitment to vernacular culture was not nostalgic but subversive. He reimagined the stage as a site of cultural negotiation, where the past was not to be fossilized, but lived, performed, and contested. *Agra Bazar*, thus, becomes a dialogue between historical memory and contemporary identity, using Nazir's poetry as a lens to interrogate questions of class, language, community, and nationhood. In doing so, the play challenges dominant aesthetic norms and aligns itself with what Rustom Bharucha describes as the "decolonization of the imagination."

3. Tradition as Performance and Resistance

Tanvir's dramaturgy deliberately employed forms such as Nautanki, dastangoi, choral music, and street performance, allowing the play to transcend the boundaries of proscenium theatre. These performance traditions are not only aesthetic devices but repositories of communal knowledge and resistance. Nautanki, with its satirical songs and exaggerated acting, provided a framework to critique social inequities, while dastangoi revived the performative art of storytelling deeply embedded in Indo-Islamic culture. By employing these forms, Tanvir constructed an embodied counter-archive that resisted both colonial theatrical paradigms and elitist modes of representation. This theatrical strategy was intrinsically political. It asserted the value of indigenous knowledge

systems and disrupted the cultural monopoly of Eurocentric dramatic conventions. The use of open, non-hierarchical performance spaces emphasized theatre as a dialogic, participatory, and egalitarian medium, blurring the distinctions between performer and audience. Such spatial and stylistic choices also mirrored the ethos of Nazir Akbarabadi's poetry, which celebrated the local, the ordinary, and the marginal. Moreover, Tanvir's use of Hindustani, a hybrid of Hindi and Urdu widely spoken by common people, becomes a potent linguistic strategy of inclusion and resistance. In the wake of Partition, when language became a battleground for religious and national identities, Tanvir's deliberate adoption of a composite linguistic register acted as a counter-hegemonic gesture. As Harish Trivedi observes, Tanvir's choice of vernacular was a statement against the "communalization of language" that had become entrenched in post-Partition India. Thus, Agra Bazar becomes a space where language unites rather than divides, reflecting a cultural politics that affirms plurality over purity.

4. Theatre as Cultural Archive

The notion of an archive traditionally evokes images of texts, documents, and physical records stored and preserved for historical reference. However, in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor proposes an alternative paradigm: the concept of the "repertoire," which refers to embodied practices, gestures, orality, movement, and memory transmitted through performance. According to Taylor, performance is a vital mode of remembering that challenges the primacy of written documentation. Agra Bazar perfectly aligns with this notion. It is not simply a historical reconstruction but a living cultural organism that transmits memory through song, movement, and speech. Nazir Akbarabadi's poems, which form the textual core of the play, are enacted, sung, danced, and performed, thereby becoming dynamic acts of remembrance and cultural communication. Each staging becomes an event of cultural transmission, where memory is not merely recalled but re-enacted. Tanvir's decision to cast amateur performers from Naya Theatre—his pioneering troupe composed of rural, tribal, and working-class individuals—further enhances the play's function as a grassroots archive. These performers bring with them oral traditions, gestures, idioms, and lived experiences that formal theatrical training might otherwise erase. Their presence asserts that cultural knowledge resides not in elite archives but in bodies, communities, and practices. As Rustom Bharucha articulates, "Tanvir's theatre is a pedagogy of resistance—it teaches while performing, and performs while remembering". Agra Bazar, then, is not simply about historical recovery but about reactivating cultural memory through collective performance. It functions as a pedagogical space where actors and audiences together reimagine history and reassert alternative modes of cultural legitimacy.

5. Identity and the People's Theatre

Agra Bazar is also an exploration of identity through the lens of performance, language, and community. Rather than imposing a singular or monolithic conception of identity, the play celebrates cultural heterogeneity, religious cohabitation, and linguistic hybridity. Set in the

bustling space of a marketplace, the play constructs a metaphor for a democratic and participatory public sphere, where people from various castes, religions, professions, and backgrounds coexist and interact without hierarchy. This inclusiveness aligns with the pluralistic vision of Nazir Akbarabadi, whose poetry is animated by the vibrancy of everyday life and shared humanity. Through characters that represent diverse strata of society—from fruit vendors and ascetics to schoolchildren and fakirs—Agra Bazar affirms the legitimacy of subaltern voices and communal coexistence. In this performative world, identity is dynamic, lived, and shared rather than essentialist or imposed. The act of performing Nazir's poems as a collective expression enables a reconstruction of cultural memory that is both celebratory and critical, anchored in the ethos of a lived democracy. The play also exemplifies the core principles of people's theatre—a theatre created by and for the people, reflecting their stories, struggles, joys, and values. Its form rejects bourgeois theatrical conventions and instead invites direct audience engagement, often dissolving the fourth wall. The non-linear structure and integration of music, dance, and dialogue evoke traditional communal storytelling practices. Ideologically, it embodies resistance to dominant narratives and champions the cultural agency of marginalized groups. By foregrounding everyday subjects and folk idioms, Agra Bazar reclaims art as a collective, socially engaged enterprise. It constructs a counter-narrative that celebrates difference while advocating for solidarity, thus modeling a deeply ethical form of theatrical citizenship. In Habib Tanvir's vision, theatre is not merely a reflection of society but an active participant in the shaping of inclusive cultural identities.

6. Conclusion

In *Agra Bazar*, Habib Tanvir crafts more than a theatrical performance; he constructs a living cultural artifact that redefines both the aesthetics and politics of Indian theatre. The play does not merely represent history—it performs it. It enacts a people's archive, where oral traditions, folk forms, and vernacular languages converge to keep cultural memory alive. Tanvir's theatre, then, is not confined to textuality or the fixity of written history. Rather, it engages in what Diana Taylor describes as the "repertoire"—a bodily and ephemeral mode of transmission that embodies knowledge, resistance, and collective memory. By dramatizing Nazir Akbarabadi's inclusive and populist poetry, Tanvir resists the hierarchical binaries often imposed by colonial and elite narratives: high versus low culture, classical versus folk, urban versus rural. *Agra Bazar* dismantles these dichotomies by affirming the everyday lives of fruit sellers, faqirs, women, and children as central to cultural identity. This is theatre as pedagogy, as resistance, and as social critique. Furthermore, the spatial politics of *Agra Bazar*—performed in marketplaces and non-proscenium settings—exemplify Tanvir's commitment to democratizing theatre. His choice of Hindustani and the inclusion of amateur, often rural performers emphasize authenticity over artifice and participation over spectatorship. In doing so, Tanvir challenges the exclusionary practices of mainstream Indian theatre and asserts the stage as a space of cultural negotiation. Ultimately, *Agra Bazar* is a revolutionary cultural archive: one that performs memory instead of storing it, resists hegemonic narratives while embracing multiplicity, and reclaims the theatre for the people. Its legacy lies not only in what it portrays, but in how it is continuously reinterpreted and re-performed, adapting to changing contexts while remaining rooted in its foundational vision.

Tanvir's work reminds us that tradition, when performed critically, becomes a site of both preservation and transformation.

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